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The EU: The real sick man of Europe?

Democratic deficit, enlargement fatigue and ever more rescue funds: is there still a future for a common Europe? In a discussion in Eurozine's series "Europe talks to Europe", prominent intellectuals and opinion makers from western and eastern Europe diagnosed causes for the current malaise of the EU.

Therese Kaufmann: Martin Simecka, you once said that the biggest political moment for Slovakia was not 1989 but 1998, referring to a moment in Slovakian political history when the nationalist authoritarian government of Vladimir Meciar fell. You have also said that this political change was the result of a combined effort of many different groups in Slovak society: intellectuals, NGOs, media, politicians and diplomats. What is necessary for political transformation? Can Europe learn something from the Slovakian experience?

Martin Simecka: Sometimes I feel like an expert not on integration but on disintegration. I was part of the movement that brought about the disintegration of the communist empire in 1989; then I was a very sad witness to the disintegration of Czechoslovakia in 1992; and then again of a much happier event, the disintegration of Meciar's authoritarian regime in 1998. What I have learned from all this is that it's all about ideas. The communist system collapsed because it no longer had an idea of its own future. Czechoslovakia dissolved because it didn't believe in its own future. Meciar fell because society believed in ideas that were stronger and more powerful than that of his regime. In 1998 it was not only about getting rid of Meciar, it was also about becoming a part of the European Union. There was a vision for the country.

The current problem with the EU has to do with ideas. The idea of European integration has been driven by the past; by the horrors of WWII, by the Holocaust, by a long history of conflict. Today, the idea of the EU is instead driven by the future — but in a bad sense. If previously it was fear of repeating the past that pushed European integration forward and furthered peace and prosperity, today European policies are driven by fear of the future. We are afraid of increasing migration, of the consequences of the financial crisis. The future is not something that we believe in; we are afraid of it.

In 1990, when I saw the first nationalists marching on the streets of Bratislava, calling for an independent Slovakia — it was just a few months after the Velvet Revolution
I predicted that Czechoslovakia would fall apart. No one believed me at the time; it was regarded as impossible that a country that survived fifty years of communist rule would split up. But the impossible happened within two years. I have the same feeling now. The collapse of the European Union is possible. I hope that I am wrong, but the signs are there.
As a writer I see these signs in the language and in the culture of debate. In the early 1990s there was a fierce debate in Czechoslovakia between what could be called "nationalists" and "federalists", between those who wanted the country to split and those who didn't. And it was the former who won the battle of ideas. Their idea was simple and powerful: we want our own nation, we want to live in our own, independent state. The federalists, on the other hand, were described as defending something artificial and bureaucratic, something centralist and undemocratic −− Prague was the symbol of all this. They were accused of having lost touch with the people in both parts of the country. In fact, it was impossible for the federalists to defend themselves, since the language that developed made them the bad guys by default.

Today, you hear exactly the same arguments about Europe. The Euroskeptics describe Brussels as an undemocratic and bureaucratic centre of power that has no legitimacy. When even a declaredly Europhile outlet like the EUobserver adopts Stalinist vocabulary to describe the institutions of the EU, you know the mood is bad. The word "troika" is being used to denote the trio of the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund that together have prescribed austerity measures in Greece and Portugal. It's difficult to find a more negatively loaded term. During the Stalinist terror, "troika" described the three people from NKVD that arrested and executed Soviet citizens, an instrument of political repression. This word is now used for representatives of European institutions!

This is only one example of how language is used and abused — and there is no defence against that. President Vaclav Klaus in Prague — meanwhile one of the most Euroskeptical places in Europe — responds to Tunisian migrants arrival in Italy by calling Schengen "a bad idea from the start". Prime minister Petr Necas uses the term "Debt Union" to describe the EU. You can't argue against such statements because they are so simple. Language goes on and on, and those who defend the European idea have an almost impossible task.

TK: You describe debates about Europe taking place in Slovakia and the Czech Republic. But do we have a European debate? Surely what we miss is a common European public sphere where such a debate can take place? Sonja Puntscher–Riekmann, why is it so difficult to create a transnational public sphere?

Sonja Puntscher–Riekmann: There is a European public sphere. All over Europe, in different languages, we are discussing the same issues. It might be that they have different connotations — the emphasis is not always the same — but a whole range of issues is being discussed. But we have to realize that there are different ways to discuss Europe. To express how much we love Europe is certainly not the only way. In fact, that is not a discussion at all; that is a declaration of love. Democracy is about accommodating conflicting interests. This means that we quarrel, that we have conflicts on a number of issues all the time. Also about Europe.

What characterized the EU up until the Treaty of Maastricht was a process of integration that can be described as a series of small steps. It was also a process of integration behind closed doors. This policy of small steps is a problem. The representatives of the member states at the European level usually have no idea of what the future of the EU should be. If they do have a concept — and there were times during the integration process when such ideas were flourishing — they don't dare to sell it to their national audiences.
The title of this discussion is: "The EU: the real sick man of Europe?"
Throughout the history of the European integration process, a series of ailments have been diagnosed following different crises: think of the empty–chair policy of Charles de Gaulle in 1965, or the Eurosclerosis debate in the 1970s and early 1980s. Sclerosis is a serious illness, isn't it? Nevertheless, at some point, someone came up with an idea of how to go forward and end the period of stagnation. In the 1980s it was the Delors Commission that launched a series of projects that culminated in the Maastricht Treaty. After Maastricht, there was again a period of stagnation in the integration process; Maastricht had indeed been an enormous step forward.

Then, at the end of the 1990s, with enlargement imminent, the constitutional debate was launched. Coming back to what Martin Simecka said about language: suddenly, the word "constitution" was driving the debate. Once the constitution had been rejected by the French and the Dutch, the term "constitution" had to disappear. At the 2007 EU summit in Berlin, Angela Merkel blamed this word — constitution — for the failed referenda. So, the word disappeared, but not the content of the treaty. The Lisbon Treaty actually contains 95 per cent of what was there in the constitution.

This illustrates that what we are experiencing in Europe is, more than anything else, that the governments of the member states don't dare to say what they are actually doing once they enter the Brussels arena. When they return home, they present themselves as national heroes who once again have defended the country's interest. They would never, ever say that they have contributed to another piece of the mosaic being constructed at the European level. This is, of course, detrimental to the whole process.

Today, much of the discussion focuses on the fact that there are net payers and net beneficiaries in the EU, the so-called transfer union. To be frank, there is no way out of that: that is the future of the EU. However, that doesn't mean that there aren't ideas about how to get out of the current crisis. It's just a matter of doing things! It's not about asking ourselves whether or not we are European, whether we are Austrians, Bulgarians, Germans or Slovaks. Identity is formed through action — in the pursuit, if not of happiness, then of a certain idea about Europe. And this idea has to be institutionalized. If we concur in that process, identity will follow.

TK: You say that many politicians do not declare to their national audiences what they have said and done in the Council. But if there were a transnational public debating these issues, wouldn't they be forced to do so? Wouldn't that help?

SPR: Yes, of course that would help. In fact, it would be enough if the national media, national journalists, were to wait at the airport when their ministers come home, asking them what they have done, why they have decided this way rather than that, whose interests have been represented in that decision, and what it implies for Europe as a whole. That's what journalists do they do when they write about national politics. So why not European? Tk: Claus Offe, in your work you link the question of democracy to a discussion about social justice and the welfare state; for example you write about the concept of a basic income. Why hasn't this become a European issue? At a recent lecture at the Institute for Human Sciences here in Vienna, you talked about social responsibility as a key notion of modernity. Whose responsibility is it to heal the sick man, the EU? And does the healing process have anything to do with social issues?
Claus Offe: In the current situation, hardly anyone stresses the European social model; all the attention is now directed at surviving the crisis, at preventing things from falling apart. But the Agenda 2020 actually does contain many interesting new ideas and is not as shamelessly over-ambitious as the Lisbon Agenda was.

However one concept that is being used in a defensive and even obstructive way is "subsidiarity", the policy of non-interference in the member states' remaining realms of jurisdiction. The process of negative integration — "market making" — makes it more difficult to pursue social policies, to initiate reforms, at the national level. The common market has created a "competition state" characterized by stiff competition between member states. One way for national politicians to win an advantage in this competition is to pursue policies of austerity — social as well as fiscal. If a member state insists on a different tradition — Bismarckian or otherwise — of organizing healthcare, pensions, the labour market and poverty, it risks losing out as a "competition state". This logic of Europe as expanded market causes it to be perceived by its citizens as an entity that in fact undermines social protection and socio-economic security.

Recently both the Commission and the Council of Europe introduced a new concept that has the potential to inspire a supranational approach to issues of social justice and redistribution: "shared social responsibility". I don't know if this concept will take off, but at least it has been thrown up in the air. I find the concept interesting, but I guess that most European politicians will think that there are more important things to attend to at the moment. Nevertheless, issues of cohesion, integration, solidarity and redistribution are bound to remain on the agenda, including redistribution among member states, which is currently denounced using the term "transfer union".

I like to think of Europe as a set of building sites. These are places where raw materials are somehow synthesized by architects and engineers who know how to construct something out of these materials. We know which and where the European construction sites are, but nothing happens there. The engineers and architects have either stayed at home or have run out of ideas. Or else they are simply incompetent. Europe is full of permanent construction sites that make a lot of noise but where very little if anything ever gets built. No wonder that Europe is watched by many of its citizens — primarily the more vulnerable and precarious ones — with fear and suspicion rather than with confidence and hope.

Let me point to three of those construction sites. The first is obvious: East vs. West, old member states vs. new member states (including future or potential member states). Ten of the twelve new member states of the EU-27 are post-communist states, marked by the historical and political experience of state socialism. Analysts have started to talk about the specific features of post-communist capitalism and post-communist democracies. These are telling terms and are accompanied by descriptions such as capitalism without capitalists, democracy without democrats, or Europeans without European aspirations. The eastern enlargement was based on an implicit misunderstanding. The old western European member states, the EU 15, had a single ambition: to ensure via external control and discipline that "those people over there" become "normal", i.e. are turned into liberal democracies and viable market economies. Afraid of the Meciar's of these countries, the western states promised EU membership and hoped that would encourage the post-communist states to "behave". The priority was political normalization.
The expectations on the other side of the former Iron Curtain were quite different. What people wanted wasn't the rule of law and other features of liberal democracy but prosperity and market access. But precisely in this respect they have been confronted with a series of disappointments. Eastern European economies turned out to be dependent economies, and many of them — not only Latvia — were severely hit by the financial crisis. In some places, GDP shrunk by 30 per cent within a year. Wages were cut. Together this has caused huge economic disappointment.

The old member states also experienced a series of disappointments. After accession, all sorts of phenomena surfaced: the Meciar regime, the new Hungarian constitution, ethnocentric populist movements all over the place, etc. These are phenomena that do not fit the image of liberal democracy. Worse still, they are spreading in the old member states as well. What characterizes this building site, then, is mutual disappointment.

The second construction site is the relationship between north and south: the core countries vs. GIPS or PIGS (Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Spain). Europe seems so far unable to manage the euro crisis in a fashion that is both effective and acceptable to national constituencies of the poor and the rich nations alike. Politicians want, first of all, to be (re-)elected — they aren't to be blamed for this; that's what they do — and if you listen to what they say, 90 per cent of their public speech acts belong in one of three categories. The first is "blame avoidance"; the second is "credit taking" or "credit claiming"; and the third is "position taking", i.e. taking positions that they know are popular. Yet if we look for political leaders who are credibly committed to European integration — as an indispensable means to preserve accomplishments such as international peace, liberal democracy and socio-economic security throughout the mega-region called Europe by the means of cooperation and mutual supervision and accountability — we find hardly anyone who could be remotely compared to Schuman or Monnet, Mitterrand or Kohl.

The third construction site is the relation between the member states and Brussels: the nation states vs. the Commission. Here, we see clear centrifugal tendencies. Issues that urgently need to be coordinated at European level — recent examples are the refugee crisis, the thorny issues of tax harmonization, fiscal policy, or the EU budget — aren't dealt with together; the will and capacity to cooperate is simply not there. On the contrary, national politicians and governments exploit these issues in order to be re-elected. Berlusconi in Rome, Sarkozy in Paris, Seehofer in Bavaria, Merkel in Berlin — they all take positions that they know are popular, in this case to keep migrants out and never pay for others.

This is a strong political trend that not only hampers but actually reverses European integration. I know, this isn't a very cheerful discourse and the spectacle is not one that one can observe with pleasure. It's a disaster! And the greatest disaster is that there are very few ideas about how to solve it.

TK: This brings us to a fourth construction site: How does the EU relate to the rest of the world? What kind of understanding of community does the EU have? And where are the boundaries of such a community? What is the outside of the EU? Who is its Other?

Ivan Krastev, you have written that "Europe has lost its self-confidence, its energy and its hopes that the next century will be the 'European century'. From Beijing to Washington — and even in Brussels itself — the Old Continent is
widely viewed as a spent geopolitical force, as a great place to live but not a
great place to dream. [...] The emergence of a more multipolar world has had unexpected consequences for Europe's worldview as well.” You also speak about Europe as peripheral, which reminds me of Dipesh Chakrabarty's concept of "provincial Europe". This seems to suggest a completely new perspective on Europe and the world.

Ivan Krastev: The different uses of the concept "the sick man of Europe" throughout history have something in common: from Tsar Nicholas' reference to the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century, to the 1980s when it was used for the Soviet Union and its satellites, to today — Bulgaria has always been counted in. Psychologically this is important and I want to pick up on what Martin Simecka said earlier. A major reason for the differences between how western and eastern Europeans reflect on the current crisis is that we are hostages to different experiences. A Bulgarian who was 20 or 25 years old in 1989 assumes any status quo to be unstable. In Bulgaria, it was thought that communism would last forever. But one day, it was not.

Part of the strategy in the current debate about the European crisis is to trivialize it. This is just as true for the financial world as for politics: we are no longer fighting problems, we are trying to prevent panic.

It has been said that the European Union is losing its narrative. I think that we Europeans have become victims of the way we tell our own stories. The EU has overcome a number of different crises, and I very much agree with Sonja Puntscher-Riekmann on this point. We have told the story of Europe as a project that has been realized. When you start to talking about it as a project, questions will follow: What's next? Where is this project going to end up? And this is a very difficult question to answer. Perhaps the question we should ask is: Which crisis will help us move forward and to solve this or that problem?

There is a paradox that we know from the countries of the former Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union: that while younger generation is much more European-minded than the previous one, it is less interested in defending the European Union. It takes the EU for granted; defending it makes no sense to them. Identity building is a difficult task. Identity is built through a series of traumatic experiences, wars and so on. It is difficult, if not impossible, to build identity solely via institutions.

One an answer to your question is that the European Union has misread the conditions for its success. The EU has been very critical about the unipolar American world. There might have been good moral arguments for that, but the special role played by the EU for the last 15 years was very much in the context of US hegemony. That was the context in which the EU put security policy within brackets and developed its "soft power". This was when and where the EU formed its perception of its own identity. This belongs to the past. In a post-American world, the European Union, instead of being the major beneficiary, is rapidly becoming one of the major victims. Not only at the economic level, but also in foreign policy.

One can see this in Libya. Three of the major European states decide how to respond solely on the basis of their domestic political situation. Nicolas Sarkozy decided to intervene because of domestic politics. Angela Merkel decided to abstain in the Security Council because of domestic politics. This is an historic moment. For the first time you have a situation where the foreign policy elites have totally lost control over the foreign policy agenda. From this
point of view, there is no European foreign policy at all!

The consequence is the marginalization of Europe. This is a process that in a certain sense was unavoidable. In economic terms, Europe is not going to have the weight it used to. Europe is overrepresented in all international institutions and this won't last much longer either. Frankly, it is somewhat ridiculous to have small or medium-sized European nations throwing their veto around while big countries like Brazil or India aren't being represented at all.

As a result of all this our perception of our own model has changed. Five years ago, intelligent people could say that, while Europe might not be a major military power and while our influence can't compare to that of the US or even China, we still represent the future of the world. We are post-national and post-sovereign; our way is the way things will naturally develop. We have now discovered that what we thought was universal is actually exceptional. For example, Europe is a secular place, but you can't see this type of secularism spreading globally. On the contrary. The same thing with sovereignty: we believed that as soon as a country was democratic, it would also embrace the postmodern view of sovereignty. But look at India, a democratic but also highly sovereignist country.

So, we are facing a world that we expected to go our way but didn't. This is part of the problem that we are now facing.

As far as the enlargement goes, the comparison between 1989 in eastern Europe and 2011 in the Arab world is highly telling. 1989 opened the democratic imagination of Europe. European politicians and citizens alike had the feeling that one could transform the world around you, that one could make others become like you. 2011 has instead fired the demographic imagination of Europe. Europe now fears that the countries in northern Africa will demand that we open up to them. The only thing we see coming from these countries are immigrants. We don't see opportunities anymore, we see risks. This is a dramatic change! The fear of immigration, this demographic fear, has become a shaping element of the European Union. There is no project left, no idea about the future. We think about the future in the same way insurance companies see it — it's about minimizing risk. Thus the most successful politicians are risk managers.

These fears can sometimes be irrational, but managing the perceived risks is still what counts. Take the example of Germany, a big country with a developed public sphere and known for its serious newspapers. In 48 hours, reacting to the earthquakes in Japan, the country did a complete turn-around in its energy policy. I have nothing against that turn-around itself, but I am worried about the speed with which it happened.

The way of doing politics has changed radically, meaning that there is no longer a constitutive Other that we are going to transform. The way Europe deals with its neighbours is by being disappointed. It was as easy to be disappointed by Bulgaria in the 1990s as it is to be disappointed by Ukraine now. But when you are self-confident, disappointment is a challenge; when you have doubts about yourself, disappointment is an excuse. Unfortunately, the fact that you don't care about others doesn't mean that they won't create problems for you. The level of interdependence is so high that there's no way around this. For twenty years, the centre has expanded to the periphery; Germany, France and other core member states have been reshaping their neighbours. Today, for the first time, the periphery reached into the centre.
SP–R: There is nothing more difficult than tackling fears. Throughout history, fears have been dealt with in the most problematic ways. However I agree with you: fears have to be taken seriously. When people are afraid of something, the most common response in the last century—and—a—half has been to fall back on the nation state. This isn't just a European phenomenon, but in Europe this answer has very bad connotations. The nation state is a relatively young construction in the history of Europe and the continent is full of extremely young states, such as Germany or Italy (which just celebrated its 150th anniversary), Slovakia... But we behave as if they have been there since time immemorial. It's an idea that has been sold to people very successfully.

What might then be the way to break out of this pattern, to recreate a European narrative? My formula goes like this: we have to construct a European democratic republic. The stress should be on the word republic. This would avoid the classical parallel to state-building, which is regarded with such fear by most people: centralization, a European super-state. If we instead talk about a republic, which means that the res publica is to be conceived of and dealt with at a supra-national level, we use a very different language.

This is also why I focused earlier on the constitution of Europe. This is the word that accompanies the term republic. Paradoxically, the constitutionalization of Europe is continuing: there is a very high degree of centralization taking place in the realms of monetary policy, and we seem to accept that. In other areas we seem to be much more critical. What is this schizophrenia? I'm deeply convinced that if politicians governing incumbent people were to adopt a new a language and start to talk about a European republic, selling this idea in a convincing way, we would enter an entirely new phase in the discussion. I don't know if it will work, but we should give it a try.

MS: Yes and no. I spoke earlier about ideas, but sometimes practice and action is what really works. Before bailing out Greece and Portugal came onto the agenda, Slovakia was a very happy member of the eurozone. I live in both Slovakia and the Czech Republic and am able to follow the different national debates on Europe. In Slovakia, adopting the euro meant, from the outset, debating not only the currency but Europe in general. This was a Europe that was very practical, you felt it every time you paid your groceries. Surprisingly, the Slovaks became huge fans of Europe; before the recent crisis over 75 per cent were positive towards the EU. The Czechs, who don't have the euro, are very sceptical on the other hand; only 34 per cent would like to be part of the eurozone and if there were a referendum on EU membership today, the Czechs would not join.

To me this suggests that practical, institutional work can create a Europe without ideas.

SP–R: But money is an idea!

MS: Yes, and now the problem is debt...

IK: The lack of money is not an idea!

MS: I mentioned this because we now have a very practical problem of how to solve a crisis that developed from a financial and economic crisis to a political one. Vaclav Klaus is right about one thing: politicians don't dare to say the truth. Were they to say that we have to save the euro because it's in our national interest, everything would be different. But they don't say that — and
they can't.

As for the question about the disappointment of the new member states, I still think that there is some hope and expectation in eastern Europe that Europe can prevent mafia-type capitalism and systemic corruption characterizing these countries, that it can save us from our own errors over the last twenty years.

**CO:** Building a European republic is a very demanding, perhaps too demanding, a task. Historically, republics — or, more broadly, nation states — have come into being in connection with some idea of liberation, be it unification, as in Germany or Italy, or separation from empires, as in Greece in the 1820s. The territorial organization of political rule is driven by passions that unite people in a struggle. There is no parallel to such a spirit in Europe today. The member states already enjoy their liberties since they are enshrined in their national constitutions. We are as politically free now as we were before, if perhaps less socially and economically secure. And it certainly isn't the EU that can take credit for eastern Europe's liberation from the Soviet yoke.

**SPR:** Yes, you're right, liberation would of course not be similar to that of Greece in the 1820s or eastern Europe in 1989. What we would be liberated from would be the fate of becoming marginalized and irrelevant in the world. My idea of republicanism is not one of liberation from absolutist monarchs or imperial tyrants, but the reinvention of the capacity to act in a global context. That will never be achieved by small nation states alone, or even by big ones.

One of the problems with the European construction site, to take up the metaphor, is that the early integration process of the 1950s, 60s and 70s allowed for the "rescue" of the sovereign nation state. In the shadow of this integration, the nation states crawled back in. But in fact it's all pretence. Slovakia will never be able to make its voice heard in the IMF or the WTO. So, what we will be liberated from is the illusion that we are important. We are not — unless we are united.

The EU is not the sick man of Europe — the member states are the sick men of Europe. The EU is what the member states want it to be. George Washington's famous sentence holds true for Europe as well: "We must, indeed, all hang together, or most assuredly we shall all hang separately." It is admittedly a rather different sort of hanging, there are no Brits that will hang us by our necks, but we will become marginalized and irrelevant if we don't join up.

To the question of demography, the problem is that Europe doesn't declare itself as a continent of immigration — which it is. In fact, much more immigration will be necessary in order to maintain a demographic structure that is sustainable in socio-economic terms. To recognize this would in itself represent a different view on immigration compared to today: to say that immigration is part of reality and that the EU will have a common policy on this issue, as other immigration countries have, instead of letting individual states or regions — Italy, Lampedusa or whatever in the case of the immigration crisis — try to deal with it best they can.

**IK:** I don't think that we are really being fair to the politicians. Unlike public intellectuals, they have to face their voters regularly. There are some difficult choices to be made and not all good things go together. Let me again use the example of immigration. There is plenty of research to show that there is a
strong positive correlation between the ethnic homogeneity of a society and the readiness to redistribute its wealth. Solidarity is to a large extent based on the idea of an ethnic community. Here, two of the major principles of the Left clash with each other. On the one hand you have solidarity, which is easier to implement in a national context than a European one. On the other hand, the Left has historically promoted tolerance and openness to the other. We don't know how to deal with this and thus end up in trying to criminalize the fears of people. This is not a good policy.

SP−R: I am not so sure that redistribution is only possible in an ethnically homogenous polity. I am a born Italian and since I was able to speak I have heard how we shouldn't transfer the wealth of the north to the lazy, mafia−ruled south. The same song you can now hear in Belgium. Ethnic homogeneity is certainly no guarantee for solidarity, and no requirement either.

IK: In any case, republicanism is a very attractive idea and I am inclined to agree with you that the marginalization of Europe should be tackled in this way. It is interesting though to see how Europe is framing its marginalization today: it is trivializing it. Marginalization is not a war, with a moment when someone attacks and you need to defend yourself. You lose power and influence gradually, day by day.

Instead of facing up to reality, Europe makes a virtue out of its weakness by reframing every security conflict as a problem of social conditions or something similar. If you want to have republicanism as a response, you need to acknowledge the real problems. All 27 member states need to do that — at least at the level of elites. But Europe is not supposed to have problems. We are in the business of trivializing everything happening to Europe. Today there are political leaders saying that the end of the euro is the end of the EU, but if tomorrow two or three countries were actually to leave the EU, the message will be that nothing really happened: "We decided that it's probably better at this moment to..."

CO: You can distinguish between a few different types of ideas in the current debate about the future of Europe. The most modest one — which is clearly inoperative — is that there is no alternative; we can't fall back, even if we stagnate. Yes, it might create problems to turn back, but this will not prevent anyone doing it; regression and disintegration are not to be excluded as possibilities. Look at the Danish demolition of Schengen rules.

The second argument is about economies of scale: Europe needs to be big in order to be a prosperous global player. Therefore we must merge our resources, be it economic or military. The expansion of markets will bring eternal growth and prosperity, as the 1988 Cecchini report professed. So the argument goes. None of this is true however. There is no reason for anyone to support Europe just because it is a growth machine or global power, on the basis of the logic of economies of scale. After all, this growth machine, to the extent it operates at all, is bound to produce losers as well as winners; and it weakens rather than strengthens democratic accountability.

Neither claims about irreversibility nor prospects of economic growth are sufficient as a basis for confidence in Europe and its sustainability. But today's European elites content themselves with exactly these two arguments. They can't come up with a third — nor is it, admittedly, easy to do so. Your European republic is, if I understand you correctly, would be something that galvanizes the passions and loyalties of people who think of each other as
belonging to a transnational political community. The problem is that this is not generated by growth and competition; it is generated by an idea — and this idea is precisely what is missing.

If you ask Europeans what the tensions and conflicts in their societies are and give them three alternatives — labour vs. capital; bosses vs. employees; or immigrants vs. indigenous populations — the number picking the third alternative is five times as high as that of the other two combined! This is the prevailing perception of today’s social conflicts. But it is irrational. Europe is an immigration continent — and it is in its interest to be one. Restrictive migration controls only increase irregular migration rather than keeping people out. Frontex is largely a fraud, invented for public consumption and appeasement. If you are willing and capable of trying to enter Europe three times across its outer borders, the success rate is 98 per cent.

You can get in if you want to — but under miserable circumstances that are also very costly for the societies of destination. So we need to find a solution for this — and the only solution is the long and costly process of (educational, economic, political) integration of people who are arriving anyway. But no politician dares to tell this truth to his or her constituency, because they think that this will increase support for xenophobic populist parties. In reality, the opposite is true: by staying silent about this simple fact of European life, they see to it that support for the populist Right grows even stronger, because no one dares to vigorously contradict them for reasons of electoral opportunism.

This is a very dangerous trap in European rhetoric. If we could take just one little step forward, this is what it should be: telling the truth to ourselves, to our voters, to the Berlusconis of this world... Given the general scarcity of ideas, I think that this is the best one we can come up with.

MS: I started off talking about the depressing dearth of ideas, but I actually do have an optimistic vision of sorts. Perhaps we need an ever deeper crisis than we have at the moment. That would force the Eurosceptic defenders of the nation state to define what they actually want to do with those nation states. In eastern Europe, the nation state is a synonym for corruption and it isn't easy to defend that idea. Furthermore, if some countries were to leave the EU: why not? It would be an interesting experiment and those states would have a lot to prove.

The Europhiles might be suffering from a dearth of ideas, but the anti–Europeans are suffering even more. That could be a very interesting battle of ideas: whose lack is greater?

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